

Kathryn E. Salzer, *Vaucelles Abbey. Social, Political, and Ecclesiastical Relationships in the Borderland Region of the Cambrésis, 1131-1300, Medieval Monastic Studies, 2* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017). Print, 365pp., €100.00, ISBN: 9782503555249.



Review

The subject of Kathryn Salzer's dissertation at the University of Toronto, the Cistercian Abbey of Vaucelles and its location in the border region of Western Europe makes an excellent focus for this well-researched volume. In this monograph, Salzer makes extensive use of primary sources to form a detailed picture of Vaucelles Abbey from its foundation in 1131 to the beginning of its decline in the fourteenth century, examining its influence on and influences from the surrounding area, other religious houses, and the political and commercial interests of its pivotal position.

Salzer sets the stage by introducing a peace treaty that was signed at Vaucelles in 1137 by Bishop Nicholas I of Cambrai and the townspeople. This treaty spotlights the significance of Vaucelles' location throughout the proceeding centuries. With a focus on the gifts, including the foundation gift of Castellan Hugh II of the Oisy family, with which the abbey was endowed, Salzer investigates the types of relationships – social, economic, political – that influenced daily lives and the development and survival of Vaucelles.

A medieval historian, Salzer accurately points out the complexity surrounding the history of power in the Middle Ages, and how problematic it can be to investigate and interpret any religious order's bureaucracy and political interests. Using charters, treaties, and endowments, a cross-section of Vaucelles' social, agricultural and economic development reveals patrons, a complex social network, and agricultural patrimony, factors that demonstrate the impact of Vaucelles on its

location in a contested border region. Thus, she sets out the parameters of her investigation as falling between 1131-1300 when economic and financial factors effected the success of the house. On this basis, Salzer compares Vaucelles to other men's houses, looking at certain aspects of this house within the Cistercian order, and seeks to elucidate how Vaucelles avoided political problems and polarizations, interacted with its friends and opponents, remained apolitical in imperial struggles, and how it prospered as a small house for a long period.

The first chapter begins by recognizing that each house of the then-young but successful Cistercian order was unique and individual due to the location of the abbey, the long-term support of benefactors, successful leadership within the community, and its contact with other Cistercian houses. Vaucelles remained largely isolated in the twelfth century, but by the thirteenth was expanding its agricultural holdings and fostering strong local and regional relationships. Salzer uses this basis to look at Vaucelles' geo-political context, and includes an overview of the history of the region in which it was founded. Salzer not only makes use of extensive surviving written records of patronage, juridical acts, charters, monograms, and seals, but also looks at the members of the lay community who were buried in the abbey. This is done carefully, with the acknowledgement of the challenge presented by authentication and the use of chronicles in a religious context. There is a decent survey of scholarship and a discussion of the influence of Frederick Jackson Turner's work on frontier regions.

The following two chapters serve to underpin the framework of the abbey's survival in this context, further examining its location and foundation, the economic and agricultural practices of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and the different kinds of gift patrons and grange management. Salzer looks at Cistercian economic

practices and the Cistercian influence on the development of Europe, including an assertion of Bernard of Clairvaux as being influential in the Cistercian expansion.

Chapters 4 and 5 revisit Vaucelles' local relationships, in particular that with Hugh II d'Oisy, as well as monasteries as gift patrons, and the implications on Vaucelles' security within the area, including how the gifts of the bishops of Cambrai helped to establish Vaucelles' control and to obtain legal rights. Both gift patrons and political position seem to have helped the house consolidate its holdings and secure its development. Salzer continues to include details such as the relationship with the local community, the cultivation of lay brothers, and vassals and serfs attached to its land. Salzer refers to the work of Stéphane Lebecq on Vaucelles, and makes a clear distinction between "patron" and "authorial patron". There is an objective sketch of the environment of political conflict surrounding the region and how Vaucelles handled these, with the conclusion that the abbey's participation was "politically astute" (p. 213).

Chapter 6 explores Vaucelles' Cistercian relationships, its successful recruiting of monks and lay brothers, the foundation of daughter houses in other regions, and the presence of other houses in the area. Vaucelles' identity as a Cistercian house seems to have been largely independent, and its strength lay in this autonomy partially due to its location and patrons. In her conclusion, Salzer gives an overview of the life of Vaucelles following 1300, including the Hundred Years War and the religious wars that necessitated the building of perimeter walls and fortifications, showing her finding that the abbey succeeded because of the expansion of its patrimony and agricultural consolidation despite conflicts.

Through her investigation of Vaucelles, Salzer makes a solid case for the further and more detailed study of smaller monastic houses, asserting that most monastic houses "continue to attract less attention, occasionally because a particular

house's existence was so ephemeral that it has left little or no literary or material footprint, but more often because scholars simply look to the luminaries when they need an example of monastic spirituality, power, wealth, or reform in the Middle Ages." (p. xvii) Salzer's book has shown that the small house of Vaucelles serves as an example that there is much that can be gleaned from the further study of and attention to these houses and their surrounding areas, and formed "an integral part of the complex fabric of medieval society." (p. xvii)

There is an extensive bibliography with an index of manuscripts that will form a valuable resource for any historian. A list of abbreviations is also very helpful as it includes measurements and coinage referred to in primary sources. There is also a note on orthography and place names. Every medievalist will find this book useful in the field of history, but it also should inspire the closer study of smaller religious houses and communities in order to better understand their process of survival and their complex relationships both internal and external, as an expression of European society beyond the focus on religious reform, enabling scholars to address larger historical questions.

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